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Humanitarian soldier

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Humanitarianly legitimized military interventions in global crisis zones, zones breeding instability—terrorism, sickness, military treats, and irregular migration—have become normalized in the post-Cold War era. Namely after 9/11, humanitarianism has become multifariously entangled with the outright political and strategic international objectives of state actors. Many researchers have argued that during this time, the so-called liberal Western states began to use humanitarian rationale, rhetoric, and practices as tools to advance their strategic objectives in global politics (Barnett, 2011; Chandler, 2006; Douzinas, 2007). This trajectory fortified the collaboration and co-option between military and humanitarian actors, resulting in a blurring of the line between military, state, and humanitarian action and actors.

As a result of the politicization and militarization of humanitarianism, the operational environment in conflict areas has changed. Blurring the boundaries between humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other actors—state, military, and counter insurgency—and their agendas in conflict zones has resulted in the shrinking of “humanitarian space.” As a result of the murkiness of the boundaries between humanitarian work and military action, the credibility of the neutrality of humanitarian actors and respect for humanitarian law has also decreased, ensuring an increased level of violence targeting humanitarian workers and a decline in the access of vulnerable populations to aid (Acuto, 2014). Moreover, the public imaginary as well as people’s conceptions of and expectations regarding foreign conflict, crisis zones, and humanitarian/military presence in areas of action have also witnessed changes. The co-option and closer collaboration of humanitarianism and militarism have also given birth to a figure that appropriately encapsulates and embodies the global politics of the politicized humanitarian system and the logics of the new wars: the humanitarian soldier.

The figure of the humanitarian soldier is apparent namely in the legitimizing speeches and the official and public relations contexts of post-9/11 military operations, and such a figure often becomes most apparent in visual form. The figure of the contemporary soldier employed in global crisis areas incorporates the physical and visual features of a humanitarian worker and a strong militarized soldier rolled into one, and therefore he/she corporally embodies the merging of humanitarian and military action. For example, material released by the multinational NATO-led International Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan characterizes the key features of the new humane soldiers in global crisis zones. The ISAF soldiers are pictured as armed with state-of-the-art military equipment and presented as strong and determined in their fight against the Taliban. Yet, in addition to this, the soldiers are habitually shown distributing humanitarian aid, providing health care, tutoring local populations, helping to reconstruct the war-ravaged country, and humanely communicating and interacting with the locals (Kotilainen, 2016).

The humanitarian soldier embodies the military-humanitarian ethos of post-9/11 global politics, and she/he represents the strong, care-giving, moral, yet militarized, power of the “international community” and the “West” and of the “humanitarian international order” (Barnett, 2010) at work on the ground in global crisis zones (De Lauri, 2018; Kotilainen, 2016). This figure, in public relations use, aspires to make Western warfare seem humane and see that it is conducted

according to the moral legitimization for such interventions; the humanitarian soldier is therefore well suited to winning over the hearts and minds of the domestic populations of the warring states. Furthermore, in addition to these deliberate objectives, the strong, militarized yet compassionate, soldiers create a symbolic contrast with the local, less-developed objects in need of help and tutelage, an image which embodies strong colonial undertones and poignantly echoes contemporary global hierarchies (Kotilainen, 2016).

The humanitarian soldier is also deployed in non-military operations, for example in the massive U.S. intervention in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake or in the intervention to help fight the West African Ebola epidemic of 2014–2015.

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